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Hellman, Matilda

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# How is the Nordic welfare state doing? Contemporary public constructs on challenges and achievements

Matilda Hellman

*Research Director, Head of CEACG Research Unit, University of Helsinki, Finland*

[matilda.hellman@helsinki.fi](mailto:matilda.hellman@helsinki.fi)

## Abstract

Public constructs of the welfare state are vital for the continuous assurance of the system's validity, sustainability and accountability. This study produces descriptive cross-country snapshots of how the welfare state is construed in contemporary Danish, Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish mass media discourse as an object to relate to. The analysis shows that in Denmark a core question concerned the welfare state's reliability and accountability to citizens, who have the right to the services that they have paid for through taxes. The problems and solutions were often portrayed as pertaining to economical prioritizations. In Finland, the ability to maintain stability and provide opportunities was framed in a historical light and as supra-generational to its character. In Norway, the legacy of the welfare state was built around notions of solidarity and a sense of community. The declining public incomes from the extraction of oil was a reality for the welfare state to navigate in. In Sweden, more than in the other countries, emphasis was put on the welfare state as a project of values such as solidarity and equality. The contents in each of the four materials can be seen to reflect their origins in operational milieus in which the welfare state is the premise for all public and democratic institutions, including the mass media.

## Keywords

Welfare state, welfare society, media constructs, Nordic comparison, dependency ratio

## Introduction

As an object and a concept to relate to, the welfare state has taken different shapes in different Nordic countries depending on historical events and political and administrative traditions. While this has been illustrated in, for example, conceptual historical analyses (Edling, 2019a), there is little research on how the welfare state figures as an object of reference in contemporary public discourse.

The mass media partakes in a public conversation that upholds and justifies country-specific welfare state cultures (Pfau-Effenger, 2005). It is part of a public sphere where the welfare state is construed and comes into being as an object for citizens to relate to. It is also a place where the welfare state materializes as an object of negotiation in the context of a country's political canon (Mutz, 2001). Public constructs of the welfare state are vital for the continuous assurance of the system's validity, sustainability and accountability.

This study is concerned with the notion of the welfare state in everyday media discourse in four Nordic countries. The aim is to produce a series of descriptive snapshots of how the welfare state materializes as an object of concern and as a point of reference in contemporary

media reporting in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. It is concerned with mean and mainstream media content from 2014–2020, i.e. the type of content that the average media consumer is likely to come across online. The study aims to shed light on the contemporary values and principles that surround the welfare state in contemporary media content.

In producing descriptive snapshots of contemporary public constructs, the study differs from other previous attempts to identify how the welfare state comes into being through communication. These studies have framed the question from an institutional and organizational perspective (e.g. Engelstad et al., 2017), looked into historical circumstances (for example, Edling, 2019a), or they have examined politicized significations of belonging and citizenship (such as Koivunen and Lehtonen, 2011).

My research questions is: How does the Nordic welfare state appear as a concept and an object to relate to in the contemporary mass media discourse in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden? The conclusions will highlight the findings in terms of general views on the contract between citizens and the system.

## The media and the welfare state

In the Nordic countries, the media has traditionally fostered democratic conditions, active civic participation, and equality among citizens. Nordic newspapers have been politically affiliated and self-regulated, and state intervention has been high on a structural level (Nord, 2008, p. 98).<sup>1</sup>

A recent monograph by Engelstad and colleagues (2017) identifies systemic building blocks which help to communicate the nature of the Nordic welfare model. These markers include normative patterns of power struggles; freedom of expression; institutional fields comprising the public sphere; modes of integration in institutional fields; and access to the public sphere (Engelstad et al., 2017, pp. 18–19). This is in line with a general consensus regarding the media's role as an important pillar of the welfare state both in its democratic and civic functions and as an educator and scrutinizer of the system (for more, see Syvertsen et al., 2014; Jensen and Lee, 2019; Hellman, 2021).

Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) have introduced the concept of a *media welfare state* claiming certain characteristics that sets Nordic media markets apart from other. The concept is used to distinguish contemporary Nordic media systems as functioning in a unique marriage between the social democratic welfare regime and the classic democratic model of a corporatist media system (see Hallin and Mancini, 2004). It entails an understanding of communication service goods as public goods; freedom from editorial interference and great editorial autonomy; cultural policy and economic support for media pluralism; and preference for consensual solutions through collaboration between state, media, communication industries, and the public (Syvertsen et al., 2014).<sup>2</sup> Presenting the Nordic welfare states as unique media system contexts arguably dissolves an ambivalence between structural state dependency (public service companies, public press supports) on the one hand, and journalistic interdependency and high professionalism on the other. The media welfare state concept can be used to affirm classic Nordic exceptionalism in a positive manner: the welfare state and the media can be seen to support each other's best parts. But does the

- 
1. While Denmark is in some senses an exception, the media landscapes have come to resemble each other even more in the past decades (see Nord, 2008).
  2. The concept is contested. For example, Ala-Fossi (2020) has contested the notion of the media welfare state simply by concluding that there is no such thing as a welfare state anymore. See Ala-Fossi, M. (2020). Finland: Media welfare state in the digital era? *Journal of Digital Media & Policy*, 11(2), 133–150.

intertwined relationship result in media content that always tend to lean towards supporting the welfare state in itself? The truth may not be so simple.

Like in other parts of the free world, journalism in the Nordic countries has served as a critic and watchdog of the political and societal elite (Christians et al., 2009), and it has also functioned as a political institution of its own (Allern & Black-Ørsten, 2011). A recent study by Jensen and Wenzelburger (2021), which incorporates cases from the Nordic countries, suggests that media attention to welfare state reforms varies in scope and prevalence in accordance with previous election results and the reputation of the government in power.

Closely related to the question of how the welfare state as a phenomenon works in synergy with mass media is how the media co-construe and mediate the welfare state as an object to relate to in its content. While the democratic functions and characteristics of the Nordic media systems have been the topic of theoretical discussions, there is a great lack of systemic insight into how the Nordic media in its content contributes to construing the Nordic welfare state as a concept and an object to relate to (see Lindell & Hovden, 2018).

We know that even if the conceptions of the welfare state vary between the Nordic countries, they all entail similar views on the ingredients of the contract between citizens and state that implies certain collective social responsibility (Edling, 2019). Sometimes the concept of a Nordic *ethos* has been used for describing certain core values upheld in the system's institutional, welfare cultural and political expressions. This *ethos* has figured as a normative – almost static – backdrop in social scientific diagnoses of welfare service cuts, new procurement models, and consumer emancipating policies (see Ahlqvist and Moisio, 2014; Eriksen, 2018; Sulkunen, 2009).

All four countries under study have their own sociocultural variants of welfare state concepts. In research that paints the meaning of historical uses of certain welfare state-associated concepts and words with a broad brush, the language use is explained through historical documentation in a realist sense (Petersen & Petersen, 2019; Kettunen, 2019; Haave, 2019; Edling, 2019b). This line of research sees welfare state concept uses in a dynamic of contestation, challenge of dominance, counter concepts, as instruments in political movements, and in the hands of actors with differing interests.

In this study, I turn to contemporary contexts and concepts related to the welfare state and the welfare society in four Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The aim is to produce overview snapshots of the typical welfare state notions (use and meaning contexts) that meet the Nordic media consumer.

## Concept use

Before proceeding to the empirical part, a note on the use of concepts: the phenomenon I study can be defined as “the media text construction of a societal system that preserves and guarantees the welfare of Nordic citizens”. Even if the concepts of the “the Nordic welfare state” and “the Nordic welfare society” differ in scholarly definitions (Robson, 2018), this difference is not made in the public discussions in the Nordic countries under study. The overlap in connotation between welfare state and welfare society is well documented, and it has been recommended that an artificial analytical difference should not be overemphasized as it does not correspond to the words’ actual mundane uses (Petersen & Petersen, 2019; Kettunen, 2019; Haave, 2019; Edling, 2019b). The English concept of “welfare state” corresponds to various use functions. One is Esping-Andersen’s (1990) basic Scandinavian welfare model, in which the large tax-funded public sector plays a pivotal role in guaranteeing the citizens’ welfare. Another use variant corresponds to the English term of a “welfare

society system”, denoting a jurisdiction that provides welfare in a cooperation between sectors, institutions, and actors in the regime of the state (see Lin, 2004). In the media discussions under study, the above accounted-for meanings overlap and are interchangeable. The welfare society and the welfare state are used in parallel connoting a Nordic societal contract with certain obligations and expectations by the public sector and the citizens. I refer to this broader phenomenon with the concept of “welfare state and welfare society”, abbreviated WFS.

## Data and methods

The material was collected through aiming to map contemporary WFS-related concepts in the public domain in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The data was retrieved from media outlets in the four countries through different search concepts. To guarantee a sufficiently inclusive signification which would nevertheless allow comparisons between data-sets, I used the following main concepts: *velfærdssamfund* in Danish, *hyvinvointiyhteiskunta* in Finnish, *velferdssamfunn* in Norwegian, and *välfärdssamhälle* in Swedish. Table 1 lists the search terms and the number of hits before excluding overlaps and irrelevant items. All searches were conducted at the beginning of March 2020, at a time when the coronavirus crisis was not yet the leading news item in the Nordic mass media.

**Table 1.** Search terms for material collection.

	SEARCH TERMS AND HITS ( <i>before exclusion of items</i> )
DENMARK: <i>Politiken</i> , DR 2019–March 2020	velfærdssamfund (203 + 63 hits); nordiske velfærdssamfund (63+5 hits)
FINLAND: <i>HS</i> (and from Swedish material: <i>YLE</i> , <i>HBL</i> , <i>Vasa-bladet</i> , <i>Ålandstidningen</i> ) 2014–March 2020	hyvinvointiyhteiskunta (101 hits); pohjoismainen hyvinvointiyhteiskunta (37 hits)
NORWAY: GoogleNews No <sup>1</sup> 2014–March 2020	velferdssamfunn (100 hits); nordisk velferdssamfunn (4 hits); nordiske velferdssamfunn (2 hits); nordiske modell (9 hits)
SWEDEN: GoogleNews Se <sup>2</sup> 2014–March 2020	välfärdssamhälle (100 hits); nordiska modellen (89 hits)

<sup>1</sup>ABC Nyheter, Aftenbladet, Aftenposten, Agenda Magasin, Altaposten, Bergensavisen, Bergens Tidende, Dagbladet, Dagen, Dagens Medisin, Dagens Næringsliv, Dagsavisen, Digi.no, E24 Næringsliv, Fædrelandsvennen, Fagpressenytt, Finansavisen, Firda, Fiskeribladet, Folkebladet, Forskning.no, Fredriksstad Blad, FriFagbevegelse, Gausdal Kommune, Hallingdølen, Hammerfestingen, Helgelands Blad, Hitra Frøya, Itromsø, Journalisten, Khrono, Lindesnes, Morgenbladet, Næringslivets Hovedorganisasjon (NHO), Nationen, Nettavisen, NITO- The Norwegian Society of Engineers and Technologists, NordForsk, Nordhordland, Nordlys, Norsk Bonde- og Småbrukarlag, Norsk Rikskringkasting (NRK), Østlands-Posten, Rana Blad, Ringerikes Blad, Stavanger Aftenblad, Strilen, Sunnhordland, Sunnmørsposten, Tønsbergs Blad, TU, TV 2, Uniforum, Utrop, Vårt Land, Verdens Gang (VG) & Yrkesorganisasjonenes Sentralforbund (YS).

<sup>2</sup>Aftenbladet, Alba.nu, Arkitekten, Curie, Dagens Nyheter, Dagens Samhälle, Eskilstuna-Kuriren, ETC, Expo, Expressen, Fastighetstidningen, Folkbladet, Forskning.se, Göteborgs-Posten, Hallands Nyheter, Katrineholms-Kuriren, Kristianstadsbladet, Kyrkans Tidning, Mynewsdesk, Proletären, Smålandsposten, Södermanlands Nyheter (SN), Svenska Dagbladet, Sveriges Television (SVT), Sydöstran, Sydsvenskan, Världen idag, Västerbottens-Kuriren (VK-Bloggen) & VXOnews.

In order to produce meaning-based descriptive snapshots of the typical WFS notions and their content contexts, it was important to include typical mean and mainstream media content. This could be achieved either by a sample logic that integrated many different media outlets or by opting for sampling fewer outlets and focusing on more mainstream sources. Due to the differing availability of online media content-assembling services in the

four countries, I had to settle for different strategies. In Sweden and Norway, the text corpora were gathered through the Google News services and therefore stem from several different outlets: daily press, tabloids, regional papers, and monthly journals by stakeholder organizations. Google does not provide the same news geo-linguistic service for Finland and Denmark, so the media items that represent these countries stem from a handful of typical, widespread, mainstream media outlets.

Google's news aggregator hoovers news from tens of thousands of sources all over the world, and search terms pass through all texts, not only in accordance with registered key words. The outlets that want to get their content registered mark their online content for the service to Hoover. Denmark and Finland do not figure as geo-linguistic logics in the Google News service. This may be the result of not enough media outlets ticking the use for the service, or because there is some sort of media sector principle opposition to the assembling service, or because it is hindered through national copyright laws (see Ingram, 2019).

The Danish dataset stems from online archives of two major mainstream media outlets: the daily newspaper with the largest readership, *Dagbladet Politiken* (from now on *Politiken*) (Stoll, 2020), and the public service TV and radio internet platform DR.dk. Even if *Politiken* is a left-of-centre daily, it was safe to assume that this mainstream newspaper with the largest readership contained welfare state-related notions and language use that are normalized and widespread in Denmark. DR.dk is the online platform for the public service company Danmarks Radio (DR), established in 1925.

The Finnish material was collected from the country's largest independent daily newspaper, the politically unaffiliated *Helsingin Sanomat* (from now on *HS*) (Statista, 2018). As the Swedish Google News platform follows the Swedish-language material ticked for the assembling protocols, an additional small corpus of texts published in Swedish-language Finnish media outlets appeared through the Swedish material gathering. This material, which comes from mainstream Swedish-language Finnish news outlets such as the public service broadcasting company Svenska YLE or mainstream dailies *Hufvudstadsbladet* and *Vasabladet*, was also integrated into the Finnish dataset.

The Norwegian data (listed in Figure 1) represents a total of 57 different Norwegian media outlets and was collected through the Norwegian version of Google News.

The Swedish material was collected through the Swedish version of Google News and comes from a total of 29 media outlets (listed in Figure 1).

All materials were published between 2014 and March 2020 except for the Danish data, which only covers the period from 2019 to March 2020. This was due to the substantial and lengthy Danish reporting, which was both exceptional and unexpected (accounted for below and in Table 1). The Danish material was collected last. It started to grow disproportionately in comparison with the other materials, so a decision was made to restrict the sample period in order to have the same amount of manageable materials. This also called for controlling whether the political affiliation of the *Politiken* had skewed the Danish material in a way that one could no longer argue that it represented typical Danish mainstream media content on WFS representations and concepts. The text length and the prevalence of material on the WFS were controlled with the same search terms in the archive of the second largest, more right-wing, mainstream daily *Berlingske*. As the control suggested the same prevalence level of the concept and text length in both outlets, it could be concluded that the Danish mainstream press texts are much lengthier than in corresponding outlets in Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The "welfare state" and the "welfare society" are also much more often referred to in the reporting. The online text materials from the public service TV and radio internet platform DR.dk were included to further balance the material

towards a mean and mainstream nature. The mainstream average nature of the *Politiken* material was controlled also against the DR material and did not deviate in terms of WFS-related language use and reporting contexts.

Due to language barriers, this study unfortunately had to exclude Icelandic materials.

The different material gathering strategies give rise to questions regarding the datasets' comparability. The materials are, however, not treated as comparable in the primary analysis. Instead, each text corpus represents for that country typical meaning-making contexts and language-based constructs surrounding the concept of the WFS. Each data set needs to be seen in view of the main aim of painting a picture of contemporary WFS-related concepts in circulation in the country under study and the contexts in which they appear in the average daily media content that reaches mass audiences. Only when the snapshot descriptions were gathered and mapped out did I spell out the typical traits in each of them.

The material was evaluated as serving very well the purposes of the study, because the focus was on the ways in which WFS can be claimed to be currently referred to and negotiated publicly as a phenomenon to relate to. (For a discussion on textual sources for a general study of concept uses and constructs, see Ifversen, 2003). The material from each country does not primarily represent the speaker (the different media outlets), but serves as examples of typical, timely, and popular notions surrounding the WFS in each country at this time in history. If I had focused more explicitly on the daily political struggles or the ways in which the WFS is politicized in media contexts, more efforts would have had to put in to ensure more exactly comparable materials and, in such a case, the four corpuses would have followed other sample strategies. The country-specific characteristics in this study are discerned in terms of the contexts that the WFS concept is used and how the WFS figures as a point of reference. Zooming out on country-specific snapshot descriptions, the material was evaluated as being as valid as it could be, given the circumstances of acquiring materials and the available resources of the study.

After the raw material was obtained, overlapping and irrelevant pieces were excluded. The total number of press items selected for the study is listed in the two columns on the far right in Table 2. The large Danish material (from the years 2019–2020) comprises a total of 262 items; 115 items make up the Finnish corpus; 85 pieces the Norwegian material; and 118 pieces the Swedish dataset.

**Table 2.** Number of pieces coded as threat and success framings.

	Threats	Successes	Other	Total items	Amount of material
DENMARK <i>Politiken</i> , DR 2019–March 2020	117 (45%)	31 (12%)	114 (43%)	262 (100%)	755 pages of text / 289,537 words
FINLAND <i>HS</i> (+ Swe: <i>YLE</i> , <i>HBL</i> )	39 (34%)	32 (28%)	44 (38%)	115 (100%)	211 pages of text / 86,763 words
NORWAY GoogleNews No	51 (60%)	11 (13%)	23 (27%)	85 (100%)	169 pages of text / 78,218 words
SWEDEN GoogleNews Se	36 (30%)	28 (24%)	54 (46%)	118 (100%)	192 pages of text / 73,636 words
TOTAL	242	100	209	577	1327 pages

The material for each country as a whole was first read through twice. During the first round,

I initially tried to separate the WFS concepts' use functions between system references and daily political meaning contexts (see Hellman 2021). During the reading, a better coding scheme appeared inductively: classifying the texts as framed by WFS-related threats and success. The framings of threat and success were listed for each item in a code book which was transferred in an Excel file as a three-code system (threat, success, other). As the main point in the media narrative is always either positive or negative, it was possible to tick a main framing for each news item. The prevalence of these stories as a main framing in the material as a whole is displayed in the left-hand columns in Table 1. Overall, stories of threat were prevalent in 42% of the whole material from all countries, whereas success stories were prevalent in 19% of the texts. Other framings were "neutral" and informative in relation to the WFS (mentioned in passing or as a side-track with no significance to understanding the WFS).

The second reading uncovered the contexts in which the threats and success stories appeared in terms of the systemic premises for the WFS. In this, I strived to identify an underlying sense of a Nordic ethos. This can be viewed as the "ethos" or an axiological striving towards a right way for the WFS to function and exist (see Hellman & Room, 2015; Doležal, 1998). Each dataset fell into its own qualitative thematic entities that included different notions of the WFS. These were separated into meaning-based codes in order to mark the places where WFS concepts appeared. These codes are listed for each country in the results section of this article.

In the third and last stage of the analysis I spelled out the descriptive snapshots of how the WFS figured in all four corpuses. These are accounted for in the results section and are summarized at the end of the article in Table 3.

Readers should bear in mind that even if threats and successes do not typically figure in the same item, their separation is artificial. One cannot exist without the other: without an assumed value and success of the WFS system, the threats and challenges expressed carry no real weight. In the threat stories, the welfare system is presented as being in danger and under pressure to change in view of its assumed value (ergo "success").

In the results section I have, for reasons of analytical transparency, put into parentheses references to media items which contain the claims or characteristics that I speak about. All texts are available online at the time of the publishing of this article.<sup>3</sup>

## Results

### WFS terms

The choice of search concepts had to follow the logic of striving to discern a phenomenon as similarly as possible in all four countries (i.e., "the system of the Nordic welfare state"). The search term trials offered interesting insights into the WFS concepts and notions in circulation in the Nordic countries under study.

As already mentioned, the Danish mass media sources referred to the WFS concepts much more frequently than other Nordic media outlets. A search of the newspaper *Politiken*'s archives with the term *velfærdssamfund* yielded 203 articles for the period from 2019 to 20 March 2020. The total number of hits in its digital archive using this search term was 3,948. To control whether this was due to the leftist leanings of the newspaper, the same search was conducted for the conservative *Berlingske* daily newspaper. The result was almost identical, producing a total of 3,664 hits. It therefore seems that the concept of

3. The mass media references and their original links are available at: [Dataverse.harvard.edu](https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/S7E8Z7), <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/S7E8Z7>



*velfærdssamfund* is used to a greater degree in Danish public discourse than in the other Nordic countries. The concept of *velfærdsstat* (welfare state) appears much less frequently in the Danish media outlet: it only yielded 32 hits in the whole archive of *Politiken*, and even fewer in that of *Berlingske*.

In the Norwegian version of Google News, news.google.no, the search for *velferdssamfunn* returned 100 hits in late February 2020. A saturation point for how many hits the service provides for each search seems to have been reached at around a hundred items. The publication years for these hits were 2014–2020, so even if the outlets may have varied in news.google.no over time, the hits are much less prevalent than in Denmark. The combination of “Nordic” and “welfare state” gave poor results: *nordisk velferdssamfunn* (4 hits); *nordiske velferdssamfunn* (2 hits); *nordisk/e modell* (9 hits).

In the Swedish version of Google News, news.google.se, the prefix “Nordic” appears very rarely in references to the welfare state: different variants of the search terms *nordiska välfärdsstaten* and *nordiska välfärdsmodellen* yielded just one article. It is more common to talk about “the Swedish welfare state” (*det svenska välfärdssamhället*). Furthermore, in the year 2014 the Swedish Social Democratic Party copyrighted the concept of *den nordiska modellen* (“the Nordic model”), which was mentioned in 61 pieces published between 2014 and 11 March 2020. In order to check the Swedish use of the term in comparison with the numerous hits in the Danish news outlets, the term *välfärdssamhälle* was fed into the archives of the Swedish dailies *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD) and *Dagens Nyheter* (DN). In SvD this search yielded 313 hits during the period from 2001 to March 2020 (and one from 1996). In DN, there were 693 hits between 1992 and March 2020. Not only did the two dailies have similar prevalence rates, but the WFS concept was clearly used much less frequently in Swedish media outlets than in the Danish mainstream dailies.

Another cultural and linguistic difference is the use of “welfare state” in Swedish and in Finnish: a search for “welfare state” (*välfärdsstat*) on news.google.se yielded 66 hits between September 2019 and March 2020. Many of these texts had been published in Swedish-language media outlets in Finland that employ a Finland-typical broad signification of the concept of the welfare state. *Hyvinvointivaltio* (“welfare state” in Finnish) is a reference to a system and society that functions as a backdrop for all types of political stories. Of all WFS-related terms, it is by far the most prevalent in Finnish, yielding 297 hits in the *Helsingin Sanomat* archive alone in the one-year period from May 2019 to May 2020. This exceeds even the numbers in the Danish media outlets, but the search term had to be abandoned in the gathering of the Finnish material as the “state” (*valtio*) in the Finnish welfare state concept would still often refer to the state sector and not to the system as a whole. *Hyvinvointiyhteiskunta* corresponded more to the connotations of the search terms in the other languages, and was therefore applied in retrieving the context sought for.

## Denmark

In the analysis of the Danish material, both the threat and the success stories ordered themselves into overlapping thematic meaning-making categories of *stable and reliable service provider*; *financial fraud and abuse*; *monetary either/or constellations*; *worrying structural developments*; *marginalization and inequality*; and *other* (e.g. *green welfare*, *city planning*). If not specified as stemming from the Danish Broadcasting Corporation DR, all references come from the *Politiken* newspaper.

The construct of the inclusive and stable caretaker function of the WFS was articulated in reports on the newly appointed Danish Prime Minister Mette Fredriksen’s opening address in the parliament in June 2019. In a DR account she maintains that “people must be able to

depend on the presence of welfare society when and where they need it” (Nielsen & Gram, 2020). Another DR account draws attention to the reliability of stable and accessible service provision as part of a transaction contract between the state and the citizen. Fredriksen points out that elderly people who have paid for WFS their whole life must know that it is there for them when it counts (Brandt, 2019b). Members of the opposition were reported to be critical of Fredriksen’s way of presenting the WFS, pointing out that she was not in a position to solve its *tillitskris* (crisis of trust) by “eliciting romantic images of a Denmark of the past” (C. Jensen, 2019). What the opposition suggested, according to the reporting, was an emphasis on the importance of a true sense of membership of society in order for people to feel that they wanted to take part in the social contract of the WFS (Hussein & Hansen, 2019).

A feature in the Danish material was the construct of the WFS in terms of monetary transaction exercises: the foundation for a strong WFS was said to rest on a responsible economic policy (Frederiksen, 2019). The solution to its challenges was often presented as part of an exercise of moving around means for various purposes. For example, savings in the cultural sector could be presented as a zero-sum game between other expenses areas such as the health and care of the elderly (Benner, 2019). Many problems were portrayed as solvable simply through more judicious spending (Ingvorsen, 2019 in DR). In DR, the economic planning of the service system was seen as in need of “development” (Boier, 2019; Brandt, 2019a) and “adjustments” (Rysgaard & Heiredal, 2019), while *Politiken* spoke of “construction” (Møller, 2020) and “improvement” (Petersen, 2019).

A distinctive reason for the economic burden of the WFS that was repeated on several occasions was the economic abuse of welfare, which was portrayed as endangering the sustainability of the Danish welfare state. A DR piece stressed the importance of ensuring that “everyone is paying” (Lindqvist, 2019), and discovering social fraud came up frequently in both media outlets (e.g. Bengtsen et al., 2019). This type of “abuse of welfare society” (Astrup, 2020) was seen partly as a result of all EU citizens being eligible to receive unemployment benefits through the unemployment insurance fund (*A-kasse*) (Thomsen, 2019). The Danish broadcasting corporation reported that the costs of social security fraud amounted to an annual total of 500 billion Danish kroner (Topp, 2019), each instance of fictive employment costing the state treasury up to 200,000 kroner (Skaaning & Bengtsen, 2019). An article in *Politiken* demanded prison sentences for people embezzling funds from the Danish state (Ritzau, 2019c). Organized crime of this kind was said to have immediate repercussions for many people and “our welfare society” (Ritzau, 2019c), and tax evasion was reported to “hollow out the foundation for the welfare state” (Sorgenfrey, 2019). According to figures from Danish Statistics, citizens owed the state 117 billion kroner in unpaid bills, value added tax, and other taxes (Ritzau, 2019a), leading to “a welfare state fiasco” (Allentoft, 2019). Members of the government said that the security network was in need of some serious mending (Fuglsang, 2019a). The solution, they said, was to apprehend those who wasted public resources and to reset priorities in public spending.

As expected, demographic developments and the increasing dependency ratio were singled out as causing great dilemmas and challenges to sufficiently covering the expenses (Rasmussen, 2020): “in 2030 the number of Danish people aged over 80 will be 161,000 higher than today, and this is why we are now witnessing welfare descending into chaos” (Rasmussen, 2019). This, as DR also argued, had lowered living standards (Olsen, 2019) and, according to *Politiken*, was stretching the capacity of healthcare services (Koch & Rasmussen, 2019). In a news item retrieved from DR, “several billions of kroner” were said to be needed to redress the balance (Nielsen, 2019) together with raising the retirement age to increase the size of the tax-paying labour force (Flensburg, 2019). In the words of Prime

Minister Mette Fredriksen: if the country wants to overcome its problems without raising taxes, it will be necessary to prioritize resource use in a different way (Larsen, 2019). The need for a taxpaying workforce was referred to in a DR piece on downshifting: will the WFS system survive if resourceful people choose to work only part time? (Christensen & Nielsen, 2019).

The weak, vulnerable, and marginalized members of society figured in the material as reminders of “the bankruptcy of our welfare society”, as was stated in a piece retrieved from DR (Skaaning & Skov-Jensen, 2019). For example, dental and oral diseases among vulnerable citizens were reported to expose the level of health inequalities in the adult Danish population (Stæhr, 2019): more than 100,000 Danes do not have their own GP (Fugl, 2019). The reporting brought attention to the marginalization of prostitutes and sex workers (Danielsen & Larsen, 2019); together with the homeless they were described as “the reverse side of welfare society” (Gejl, 2019). Youth homelessness is another clear sign that the WFS should do more to reach out and capture those “who stumble through their life” (Christiansen, 2019).

Major shortcomings in services for the elderly were identified in a piece on DR (Bengtson et al., 2019), and local authorities were demanded to invest more money in lonely older people (Kristiansen et al., 2020; Madsen & Andersen, 2019). An article published by the DR (Holst & Ostertag, 2019) pointed out that the WFS can make big savings by reaching out to older people and helping them with meals and cleaning in their homes (Holst & Ostertag, 2019). The competition for resources was expressed by immigration critics in terms of “we need to help older people before foreigners” (Andersen, 2019).

Another major contractual breakage noted in the WFS responsibilities were the flaws in childcare and education. Several media items in 2019 emphasized the need to adjust the number of children relative to the number of adults working in day care so as not to make day care centres mere “parking spaces” (Knorrenborg, 2019; Winsløv, 2019; also in DR: Øllgaard, 2019). This was believed to require minimum norms and standards (Fuglsang, 2019b; Jessen et al., 2019), pedagogues, and education (T. K. Jensen, 2019).

As a complement to the pictures of a declining WFS system, the success stories functioned as reminders of what was at stake, typically referring to the benefits and strengths of the Nordic WFS. The stories of the successes of the system were much rarer, found only in 12% of the Danish material. In these, it was established that “the fantastic Danish welfare society” (Besenbacher, 2019) needed to be preserved (*Danmarks Radio*, 2015) and defended (Ritzau, 2019b). It was pointed out that the Danish WFS had a relatively secure and well-organized labour market (Jensen et al., 2019), that it maintained safety and order in society (Michaëlis, 2020; Skotte, 2020), and provided strong legal protection (Jerichow, 2020). “Welfare society has given opportunities to large numbers of people and made Denmark strong”, Prime Minister Mette Fredriksen was cited in a piece from the Ritzau news agency (Ritzau, 2019b).

The core principle of a welfare society based on solidarity is that the fit and healthy “must look after themselves and by so doing look after the old, sick, and frail” (*Politiken*, 2020). In an article on the US presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders, *Politiken* observes that his policies seek to create a strong and progressive state modelled on the Scandinavian approach (Barsøe & Dragsted, 2020). The New Green Deal advocated by the US Congress Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is ultimately aimed at creating a Scandinavian welfare society (Brovall, 2019).

An article published on the DR platform on the movement of highly educated East Europeans into Denmark (Kielgast, 2019) concludes that “We need to become better at advertising Denmark as a good place to work. We need to be better at promoting Denmark in the countries that are training large numbers of skilled people” (Kielgast, 2019). Marketing

Denmark to a foreign workforce includes rehearsing the strengths of the WFS:

We have an effective welfare society. We have a good balance between work and leisure, and this is a great country to live in. It's the kind of place skilled employees are looking for, and it's something that can make them settle and carve out a life for themselves. (Kielgast, 2019.)

In an article on public housing, the news agency Ritzau (Ritzau, 2019a) reports that Denmark's 560,000 public housing units account for around one-fifth of the country's total housing stock: "We are a part of the Danish welfare society and thereby a central part of the Danish community", says the CEO of BL-Danmarks Almene Boliger (Danish Federation of Non-Profit Housing Providers) and continues: "It is unique that we have mixed residential areas and that in this way we're able through the welfare society to broadly address people's housing needs."

Copenhagen was also reported to set out to become a centre for developing new solutions, the leading city authorities say: "We [in Copenhagen] have created an entirely unique welfare society" (Bostrup, 2019a). In a piece on how Copenhagen schools are planned, it is maintained that "the welfare society must be measured based on its ability to make room for those with special needs." (Ifversen, 2020.) The state of good fortune can also cause speed blindness. Author and social analyst Niels Overgaard is cited: "The Danish people are living in a paradise on Earth: the high levels of stress and depression we are seeing can only be an indication of a complete blindness to our privileges", he concludes (Skov, 2020).

One of the WFS visions portrayed in the Danish media accounts is that of the green welfare society, which requires striking a balance between welfare and green values (Kaufholz, 2019). Green welfare implies solidarity with the next generation (Pedersen, 2019). In order to strengthen WFS it is necessary to strengthen the social contract because the "social contract is the welfare society itself", says an interview with Minister of Labour Peter Hummelgaard Thomsen (Lund & Teglskov, 2019).

## Finland

In the analysis of the Finnish material, the threat and success stories entailed meaning-making categories of *structural societal developments; supragenerational stability and possibilities; partisan and ideological disagreement; tensions between welfare and economy; and other (taxes, poverty, support)*.

The framing of threats faced by the welfare society appeared in 34% of the Finnish texts (39/115). Most frequently these texts referred to the constant rise of the dependency ratio. The fact that Finland has long been situated below the population reproduction rate (HS, 2019) was portrayed as harming its ability to compete internationally (Luukka, 2016), and it was reported to put a great burden on the young adult working population that needs to come up with solutions and pay for the growing public expenditure (Muhonen, 2020). In an article on two lawyers that have volunteered to help asylum seekers, the situation was described as leading to major public cuts and to wrecking the WFS system (Lehtinen, 2017). What symbolizes this wreckage in the Finnish press are the so-called bread lines<sup>4</sup> (*leipäjonot*) in which society's poorest stand and wait for handouts (Römpötti, 2014). Public spending cuts were reported in all sectors, also in culture and art (Saarikoski, 2016).

The supragenerational nature of the WFS figured both in its success stories and as fram-

4. For research about the "bread lines" as a public connotation of its own, see: Siiki, A. M. (2008). Myllypuron ruokajono – esimerkki hyvinvointiköyhyydestä. In S. Hänninen, J. Karjalainen, K. Lehtelä, & T. Silvasti (eds.), *Toisten pankki. Ruoka-apu hyvinvointivaltiossa* (pp. 127–161).

ing worrying trends. In a public discussion on the decreasing Finnish nativity, this supragenerational nature of the Nordic WFS was acknowledged by stressing that it may soon be running into trouble (Siltamäki, 2019). The same press story emphasized that unless new taxpayers turn up in sufficient numbers, the funding base will descend into crisis. An editorial in the *Helsingin Sanomat* called for a value discussion (*arvokeskustelu*) and presented an alarming picture: “Finland is ageing more rapidly than most other Western countries. At the same time the birth rate has dropped to an exceptionally low level. How can the funding of the welfare society be safeguarded in this situation?” (HS, 2018.) Both the portrayal of the severity of the situation and its solution were framed as a watershed issue between the political right and left. In the words of a right-wing politician, the Social Democrats do not understand the need for systemic change: “The Nordic welfare state model is not a collection of invariable institutions such as 100% public health centres, centrally mandated, across-the-board pay increases, carved-in-stone retirement ages, constant unchangeable social security benefits, or industries protected against competition.” (Palojärvi, 2016a.) Time and again in the media items, the general public is reminded that the Finnish welfare system depends on working people who have to foot the bill for service provision (Hämäläinen, 2019a). Under the centre-right government of Juha Sipilä in 2015–2019, the political right-wing faction saw public austerity policies as part of a solution to the growing dependency ratio. In the Finnish data that covers these years, the dependency ratio appears as a threat on both sides of the political divide. For those on the left, the austerity policy and the marketization of welfare services represent the biggest threat to the WFS: “the welfare state is being run down” (Arola & Nalbantoglu, 2018); “welfare is partly dead already” (Hämäläinen, 2019b):

The welfare state used to be based on everyone participating in the [WFS] building project. Now that the society’s safety net is nearly gone, we no longer have the kind of common good that work can produce. The value produced in workplaces slips away to business managers and foreign banks through the stock exchange. (Kytölä, 2016.)

Media stories on the successes and achievements of the WFS are more prevalent in the Finnish material (28%) in comparison to the three other countries’ corpuses. “Finland is the world’s safest country”, says a *Hufvudstadsbladet* article (Landor, 2019). An editorial argues that “Everyone agrees welfare society is a good deal” (HS, 2017). Time after time it is observed that the Nordic model is superior (e.g. Berg, 2018). “No system is perfect, but ours is a pretty good one”, concludes an editorial in the *Hufvudstadsbladet* (Ginman, 2015).

Within the framing of success, the WFS is portrayed as a fortunate circumstance for citizens. In an HS interview with Rajkumar Sabanadesan, a Sri Lankan who arrived in Finland as a refugee 25 years ago, he is quoted as being “particularly grateful that he came to a Nordic welfare state”, which guarantees the universal right to education and healthcare. He exemplifies: “Our son recently had pneumonia and then developed a collapsed lung. He received excellent care worth tens of thousands of euros at Tampere university hospital, but the cost to our family was only some 40 euros a day.” (Vainio, 2020.) In her interview with HS, the terminally ill politician Maarit Feldt-Ranta looks back at her life and notes:

Without the Nordic welfare society my life would have been completely different from what it was. This ethos of equality of opportunity is mind-blowing /--/ The Nordic welfare state, the people’s home, this is the greatest thing that any society anywhere in the world has created. The decision on comprehensive schooling is the best decision that Finland has made in its 100-year history. In politics I’ve always thought of each decision-making in terms of its implications for the welfare society. Will it improve,

cherish, endanger it? (Pallaste, 2019)

In the Finnish material, being born in a welfare state/society was portrayed as a winning lottery ticket or as an opportunity to be grateful for. A left-wing politician who comes from a working-class family in Oulu has this to say: “Life was always tight for us financially, but the welfare society enabled me to have an education. I hope this will be possible for youngsters in the future as well.” (Räisänen, 2019.) Pirkko Mattila, a newly appointed Minister of Social Affairs and Health, says she represents what the Nordic WFS can produce: “Perhaps my life is an illustration of what’s worth defending: I represent regional equality, I’ve had schooling, received child welfare benefits, I’ve enjoyed free health care and education free of charge” (Palojärvi, 2016b).

Even if the solutions to the challenges of the growing dependency ratio were a partisan and politicized WFS question, the value of welfare per se seems to gather great consensus over the political spectrum. Conservative politician Petteri Orpo says he has “great respect for welfare society, equal services, equality of opportunity, and a safe society” (Junkkari, 2018). “We must not let the welfare society collapse”, the Swedish People’s Party demanded ahead of the previous government programme (Pohjanpalo, 2015). Former President of the Republic, Social Democrat Martti Ahtisaari, wants to see the Nordic model exported globally (Sipilä, 2014), and Li Andersson, leader of the Left Alliance, is cited during a visit to New York: “The Nordic model has time and again demonstrated its strength and its success in international comparison” (Östling, 2019).

Even though WFS is in part represented as a great leveller, there are less frequent examples in the Finnish material than in the Swedish dataset, for instance (discussed later). An article on how politicians interpret the meaning of poverty (Viljamaa & Raeste, 2015) observes that a fair tax system based on the ability to pay reduces income differentials and spreads out welfare. It also helps to maintain such key structures of welfare society as welfare services and social security. “We should be proud and defend the Nordic welfare state that aims to reduce social differences and to give every individual the best possible foundation for life”, says the leader of the Swedish People’s Party. (Viljamaa & Raeste, 2015.) Antti Rinne, leader of the Social Democratic Party, speaks about a friend who got cash from social security in order to buy a pram: “This was what the young family needed, and at the time they didn’t have the money. This is what welfare society has been created for: it provides support when support is needed and helps people back on their feet”, Rinne writes. (Peurakoski, 2014.)

## Norway

In the analysis of the Norwegian stories of WFS-related threats and successes, I discerned overlapping meaning-making categories of *developments that needs attention; sustainable welfare; out of money; better than other systems; and other* (e.g. *climate, business development, immigration*).

Well over half of the Norwegian texts (51/85; 60%) portrayed the WFS as being under threat or in need of salvation, or at least readjustment. *Dagsavisen* cites a left-wing politician: “The welfare state is being dismantled at record pace” (Vestveit, 2019). On several occasions the WFS is argued as being “at risk” (e.g. Askilsrud, 2019 in the local newspaper *Ringerikes Blad*). In the Norwegian material, too, the dependency ratio plays a central role. A letter to the editor in *Østlands-Posten* says that the “underfunded welfare state” has to come to terms with dwindling oil revenue, while “nursing homes will soon see their expenses spiral” (Melbye, 2019). The core problem of there being “more and more elderly people and fewer young people” is recognized in a union organization journal (Madssen, 2019).

The developments call for a need to work towards a “sustainable welfare state”. This con-

cept is mentioned over 30 times in the Norwegian material (*bærekraftig* literally means “strong enough to hold”). Coined by Erna Solberg, Prime Minister from the conservative Høyre party, a “sustainable welfare state” appeared in different variants throughout the dataset (e.g. *bærekraftig velferd* in Lunde, 2019; also *berekraftig velferd*; *et bærekraftig Norden* in Galtung and Poleszynski, 2020; and *et bærekraftig og sterkt velferdssamfunn* in Orten, 2020). The use and connotations of this term, such as describing the WFS as becoming weaker or collapsing, also attracted some criticism. In a piece in *Dagbladet*, the term is denounced as code for the governments’ *bærekraftsbløff* – sustainability bluff (Kristjánsson, 2019).

Concerns about the survival, sustainability, and strength of the WFS mostly revolved around the funding of the services, and can be summarized in the expression of “being out of money”, much used to describe the decreasing pot of oil money at the disposal of the state of Norway. The sustainability of the *bærekraftig* WFS must be ensured without leaving it to future generations to foot the bill (Nyland, 2020). In a reply to a letter to the editor in the multicultural journal *Utrop*, migration is portrayed as a threat to the welfare of the nation state’s citizens (Fosli, 2020). A sustainable WFS needs to enforce a restrictive migration policy, says Høyre politician Torbjørn Røe Isaksen in a chronicle in the online newspaper *Nettavisen* (Isaksen, 2018). While representatives of Høyre see that migration is required in order to guarantee the survival of the WFS, they stress that migrants have to be installed in jobs and occupations where they are really needed (Sanner, 2019). “We need migrants”, announces *Folkebladet*, proceeding to paint a threatening scenario (Henriksen, 2019): “And when parts of a well-working welfare state begin to fall apart, things can start to unravel very quickly. There are plenty of historical examples, especially in small communities along the Norwegian coast.”

The conservative Høyre party of Norway is criticized for cutting welfare funding, but Heidi Nordby Lunde, a Høyre politician, responds to the criticism in the Christian online daily *Vårt Land* by saying that the realities mean that the government has to prioritize because the system is coming under mounting pressure:

The number of old-age pensioners will triple over the next ten years, and at the same time income from the oil industry will continue to fall. Child birth rates are lower than before, and by 2040 some municipalities will have fewer than two economically active people for each retired person. In addition, one in ten Norwegians receives invalidity benefits, and Norway has the world’s highest sick leave rate. (Lunde, 2019.)

In order for society to be able to stand up for the sick and the frail, “we need to take action, and do so while we still have the scope we need to make moderate changes and preserve sustainable (*bærekraftig*) welfare” (Lunde, 2019). Norway needs to get ready so that sustainable welfare can be guaranteed (Walnum & Karlsen, 2019). To this end it is imperative that people work closely together (Stokkebø, 2018). The key is to create jobs that will provide the necessary resources for sustainable welfare (Huuse & Wedén, 2016): “If we want to save Norway as a welfare state, we need to change the whole society”, says Solberg in a piece published on *vg.no* (Haugan, 2019). A sound economy relies on creating more jobs. This will help to make Norway a more secure country (Solberg, 2019).

Welfare has to be protected by industry, technology, and engineering, says a piece in the news section of NITO, Norway’s leading organization for engineers and technology students (NITO, 2020). The main forum for the employers’ organization declares that “business pays for the welfare state” (Moss, 2018). Elsewhere, it is noted that the key to welfare is working life: access to the right kind of professional skills and groups is paramount (Yrkesorganisasjonenes Sentralforbund, 2018). It is suggested that senior citizens should work

longer (Ask, 2017), supporting the thought that increased productivity and a productive workforce will finance the WFS (Solberg, 2017; Syversen, 2017).

The triumphs and achievements of the WFS were discussed in 13% of the Norwegian texts, where the WFS was portrayed as a source of national pride: “Norway has been voted the world’s best country to live in for a number of successive years”, announces a commentary regarding the future WFS (Larsen & Skjærpe, 2018). Norway’s successful WFS is based on solidarity and cooperation (Kaltenborn, 2019), and relies on trust and a sense of community (Hauglie, 2019). This is reflected, for instance, in the prevention of crime through “a welfare state which allows for social mobility”, says a piece in *Aftenposten* (Vestrum, 2020).

A headline in the local paper *Tønsbergs Blad* calls upon Norwegians to ensure that the country “remains the best country in the world” (Løvaas, 2019). On the government agenda, the foundation for the WFS is the private sector: “When Høyre speaks about a sustainable welfare state, it means sustainable /--/ perhaps most importantly in terms of economic sustainability” (Løvaas, 2019). Reporting on “50 years of the oil adventure”, *Aftenposten* observes that the sea oil drilling rig Ekofiske’s discovery of oil in late 1969 “was the start of an adventure that has made Norway the richest country in the world, with the best welfare society” (Listhaug, 2019).

The political left is also keen to claim ownership of the development of the Norwegian WFS: on the 100th anniversary of the first major victory for the Labour movement, Labour politician Bjørnar Skjæran says in *Folkebladet* that he is proud to be part of the people’s movement which “transformed Norway from a poor class-divided country into the world’s best welfare state” (Skjæran, 2019).

Brexit has the potential to pave the way to deepening Nordic cooperation, *Aftenposten* maintains. If the Nordic countries choose to work more closely with the Baltic countries, Scotland, and Ireland, they could also reach out to Canada, which shares many similarities with the Nordic countries in terms of climate, natural resources, industry, and “high material living standards and a well-built welfare state”. (Galtung & Poleszynski, 2020.)

## Sweden

The threat and success stories in the Swedish material entailed overlapping meaning-making categories of *saving and protecting the welfare*; *inequality*; *changing values*; *restructuring the WFS*; and *other* (e.g. *crime*, *work culture*).

A total of 30% (36/118) of the texts applied the framing of challenges and threats. The main focus was on work and the workforce, often from the point of view that negative developments within the WFS involve greater inequalities among different groups in society. Two ecology professors at Gothenburg University contend in *Göteborgsposten* that there should be reduced immigration if Sweden intends to maintain welfare standards and that high levels of immigration could lead to increased exclusion in society. However, they also stress that immigration is necessary in order to take care of the ageing population, which is framed as the foremost economic problem for the welfare state/society (Andersson & Götmark, 2020). The share of the working population should be growing, not waning, and there is a growing welfare gap and increasing exclusion among poor pensioners, notes a columnist in the evening paper *Expressen* (Gröning, 2018). The dependency ratio is thus given great attention also in the Swedish material. Welfare faces “major challenges due to the growing proportion of people approaching their 80th birthday” (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2019). Analysing the principles of social and health insurance in *Svenska Dagbladet*, a representative of a private security business speaks of “welfare funding” as the most obvious challenge ahead (Erlandsson, 2019). A letter to the editor by a local women’s group in the Left Party



discusses the trajectories in female-dominated occupations, declaring that “the security represented by welfare has disappeared” and that “the quality of care available to people depends on the content of the wallet” (Vänsterpartiets kvinnogrupp i Ronneby, 2020).

Both a politicized value debate and an emphasis on a changing value climate which is diluting welfare are more prevalent in the Swedish media material than in the corpora of the other three countries. In the online journal *Alba*, concerned with “culture, science, and society”, a chronicler states that “Everything we’ve become used to in connection with welfare society is now called into question /--/ the collective notion is taken over by individualism” (Wigerfelt, 2020). The good times belong in the past: journalist Malin Siwe writes in *SvD* that once upon a time there was the impression that the Swedish WFS was “well organized and efficient” (Larsson, 2019). Today, life is organized around freedom of choice under the guidance and direction of venture capitalists, says former editor Lasse Henriksson in *Aftonbladet* (Henriksson, 2019: “How Swedish welfare was destroyed”). The marketization of welfare society is a threat to its very founding pillars, says Stockholm’s Social Democratic shadow city commissioner in the socially critical *ETC* magazine (Bjuggren, 2019). Elsewhere, it is observed that “[b]elief in welfare society and democracy is being lost” (Swedin, 2019). There are commentaries about the “economization of welfare society” (*SvD*, 2016) and the “deconstruction and privatization of welfare society” (Svenning, 2019). To a greater extent than in the other datasets, the Swedish material portrays market forces and capitalism as a threat. *Aftonbladet* (Karlsson & Redar, 2019) makes the point that growing income differentials are a threat not only to the economy and growth, but also to the way in which “we have chosen to organize Swedish welfare society”. “Swedish welfare” is a phenomenon that is being hollowed out and found to be endangered (Mazetti, 2020; Svensson & Nilimaa, 2018). This welfare, according to the contributor, should be funded from tax revenues “in a smarter way” (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2020b). The erosion of the WFS is presented as a value choice with a great impact on safety and well-being.

Some 28 texts, or 24% of the Swedish material, frame the WFS as successful or victorious. Here, equal opportunity plays an important role: similarly to the Finnish corpus, the Swedish media sees the WFS as a backdrop that has meant equal opportunities for all people. Social Democrat politician Annelie Karlsson writes in *Dagens Nyheter* that “the process of building the welfare society has been carried out with the goals of increased equality, solidarity, and universal freedom in mind” (*DN*, 2020b). There is no doubt that the Nordic Social Democrats are keen to “own” the WFS concept: newly installed as Finland’s Prime Minister, the Social Democrat Sanna Marin says in an interview with *Dagens Nyheter* that she has the Nordic welfare society to thank for who and where she is today (*DN*, 2020a).

The Swedish dataset shows that the values of equality and solidarity serve as welfare society’s normative background reference, as in a letter to the editor in *Aftonbladet* concerning the age limits for accessing personal assistance for those who need help in their homes and daily lives: “when we talk about being able to lead a decent life, age limits are out of place in a welfare society” (Tallberg, 2018). The magazine *Världen idag* presents a WFS where solidarity has become internalized in the people: “Without people who grew to believe in [the child], the people’s home project [*folkhemmet*] and social welfare society would hardly have been possible. It took hard-working, loyal people willing to pay high taxes for the welfare of less fortunate citizens.” (Adolfsson, 2019.) This pride in the nature of Swedes as a people reflects an emphasis on a togetherness among people connected through the common project of welfare. The church newspaper *Kyrkans Tidning* (Dalevi, no date) represents welfare as a project that ties in with Christianity. Free healthcare and maternal and paternal leave are given as examples of Christian phenomena. The Swedish church

should understand and affirm its theological roots, and ought to appreciate the way in which these roots are interwoven with the Swedish WFS, the text concludes.

Descriptions of the Nordic model are anchored in the frame of the WFS and its fundamental principles:

The Nordic model, with its strong welfare element, ambitious principles of equality, and the supremacy of high-quality education for all, has created a society that combines vigorous growth and a high degree of social mobility. This has been a contributing reason for Sweden's welfare historically and it is key to overcoming global competition in the future. (Olovsson, 2015.)

## Discussion and conclusions

This study has mapped out snapshot accounts of the notions and contexts in which the welfare state/society figures in contemporary mass media in four Nordic countries. These are the glimpses of significations likely to meet ordinary citizens when they encounter the WFS as a notion and concept in different contexts as they scroll their online news feeds or turn on the TV or the radio.

**Table 3.** Summary of descriptive snapshots: how WFS is portrayed in the four media materials

	<b>Ethos / societal contract underscored</b>	<b>WELFARE STATE CONSTRUCT</b>
DENMARK	FOCUS ON SOCIETAL CONTRACT: Reliability and accountability to citizens, who have the right to services and welfare they have paid for.	<b>THREATS AND VILLAINS:</b> poor planning and prioritization of public expenditure, financial fraud, growing dependency ratio, embezzlers, people who haven't paid ("elderly before foreigners") <b>WEAKNESSES EXPOSED:</b> in the vulnerable groups that are not reached and covered. "The reverse side of welfare society" <b>SOLUTIONS TO CURRENT CHALLENGES:</b> Right prioritizations of economic transactions and efforts, tackling financial fraud <b>STRENGTHS:</b> can be used to attract certain kind of work force
FINLAND	FOCUS ON BENEFITS AND OPPORTUNITIES GIVEN TO THE PEOPLE: Supragenerational stability and provider of opportunities and possibilities.	<b>THREATS AND VILLAINS:</b> Increasing dependency ratio, lack of working tax payers <b>WEAKNESSES EXPOSED:</b> Declining birth rate, ageing population, inability to care for citizens, cuts in all sectors, bread lines <b>SOLUTIONS TO CURRENT CHALLENGES:</b> Portrayed in left-right struggle surrounding austerity policies <b>STRENGTHS:</b> More texts underlined the model's greatness than in the other datasets. Expressed in gratitude, winning the lottery to be born in a Nordic WFS
NORWAY	FOCUS ON THE LEGACY: Built on solidarity and sense of community. Strong enough to persist against great challenges over time.	<b>THREATS AND VILLAINS:</b> decreasing oil income, ageing population, migration (also solution) <b>WEAKNESSES EXPOSED:</b> sick leave rates highest in the world, greatly decreasing funding for services (message: "we're out of money") <b>SOLUTIONS TO CURRENT CHALLENGES:</b> right type of migration, creation of jobs, private sector engagement <b>STRENGTHS:</b> has given opportunities and – with the help of oil money – built up the world's richest county

	<b>Ethos / societal contract underscored</b>	<b>WELFARE STATE CONSTRUCT</b>
SWEDEN	FOCUS ON VALUES: Equality and solidarity woven into the system	<b>THREATS AND VILLAINS:</b> ageing population, immigration, changing value climate (capitalism, individualization, marketization, economization, privatization) <b>WEAKNESSES EXPOSED:</b> less equality, less protection of the weak, growing income gaps <b>SOLUTIONS TO CURRENT CHALLENGES:</b> immigration, better and fairer division of resources <b>STRENGTHS:</b> equal opportunities, solidarity, <i>Folkhemmet</i>

On the basis of these accounts it is possible to draw some interesting conclusions regarding how the WFS appears as a concept and an object of reference in the four countries' public spheres. In Table 3, the more prominent traits in the media constructs are summarized and concluded for each of the four countries. The logics that pertain to the social contract and the welfare state constructs in each dataset are listed as characteristics for each country's media material.

The storyline of threats is relatively similar in all four countries and aligns with a common vision of a Nordic ethos and ontology of a "state of the arts". This mainly concerns the ways in which changing realities have led the welfare state/society to breach its contract between the state and the citizens.

The core stakes are summarized for each country in the second column from left in Table 2. A WFS that does not live up to its promises to its citizens was the core question that permeated the Danish material. The solutions are often framed in economic terms: a tougher approach to welfare embezzlement and fraud, correct prioritization, and a correct division of expenses would orient Denmark towards a more stable and reliable system. The focus of the societal contract thus becomes a dilemma of accountability to citizens both in core tasks and the economic prioritization of these tasks.

In the Finnish material, the WFS was primarily painted through its positive basic function as a source of stability and provider of opportunities to citizens over time. More than the other national datasets, the Finnish corpus applied the framing of success and listed many examples of why one could be a grateful citizen in the Finnish WFS. This is much in line with previous research on the young Finnish WFS; its adoption of the Nordic welfare state model has been crucial to emphasize due to both geopolitical pressure and the national political system (see Kettunen, 2019; Hellman et al., 2017). A Finnish peculiarity is a general consensus, albeit a party-politicized WFS construct.

The Norwegian material focuses on the historical WFS legacy and the ways that it has been built on solidarity and a sense of common interest and community. The sentiment of resources running dry as a result of the increasing dependency ratio was underscored by the maintenance of the country running out of oil money. The core question of the survival of the welfare state/society revolved around whether it was strong enough to persist. This was also echoed in the "sustainable welfare" concept that was uniquely prevalent in the Norwegian contemporary political discourse.

In the Swedish mass media, the WFS was more than in the other datasets framed as a value project of equality and solidarity suffering from ideological erosion. Concepts such as capitalism, individualization, and privatization were used to describe this larger contemporary trend. Fairness and inclusion were values that the Swedish citizens were seen to have the right to demand from a functioning WFS. The system in itself was more politicized in partisan terms than for example in the Finnish material. Right-wing factions were consid-

ered to position themselves as questioning the values of the WFS, while the left-wing supporters were deemed to defend it.

All media materials can be argued to incorporate a support for the WFS in their widespread consensus on the value of the WFS system per se. Still, they incorporated discussions on realities as changing and involving tensions and contradictions. In light of these circumstances, the contents can be seen to reflect their origin in a media welfare state context, in which the (welfare) state is the operational milieu and premise for all public and democratic institutions, including mass media. A sociohistorical discussion on how the country-specific framings and stories have come to differ and what it means in terms of where the countries' strategies are headed seems a logical next chapter to this study.

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